Natural born drillers

U.S. Army's 916th Engineer Detachment close to completing rigorous tour in the Horn of Africa and in the war on terrorism.

Story and Photos by G. Lane Miley

CAMP LEMONIER, Djibouti – When people think of a military force moving in to engage in battle, they usually picture men armed to the teeth with huge battle tanks, guns and grenades.

However, when soldiers from the U.S. Army's 916th Engineer Detachment (Well Drilling) arrived here more than nine months ago to support Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa they brought their own brand of heavy equipment.

"The LP-12 drilling system works 24 hours a day and it is just a machine," said Sgt. 1st Class Russel J. Theurer, the detachment commander. "It is these soldiers who keep the drill going and get the job finished."

The reservists, based in Bismarck, N.D., were activated March 8, and arrived here April 4. Since their arrival, the engineers have drilled five wells throughout Djibouti. The well sites include the villages of Tawallah; Dikhil; Ali Sabeh, where the unit drilled two wells; Djiboutian army's de-mining camp .

Providing the villages with water will allow them to become more self-sufficient and likely deter terrorists who prey on instability.

At Tawallah, the unit's most recent well site, Spc. Jesse S. Wamsley said fostering relationships and knowing he is helping others makes his job feel more worthwhile.

The soldiers also held a key role here as pioneers for drilling projects in here in Djibouti.

"We were the first team here, so it took a while to get the projects rolling," said Army Staff Sgt. Kori J. Schantz, a squad leader with the detachment.

The Glen Ullin, N.D., native said though there was an initial lull, his crew has been busy drilling wells ever since.

He said this is the first time CJTF-HOA has had a well-drilling team in its arsenal, and the relationships they built will greatly aid their replacements and others who follow. His team has coordinated with the officials in the area to ensure there is a better understanding of the engineer's capabilities and requirements to complete their job.

"The next teams that come in will have it pretty good. We have a good supply system set up now, so that will work out good for them. It will go a little smoother, I think," Schantz said. "We got the Djiboutian Agricultural Team off the idea of us doing the real high capacity wells and doing more small stuff for the communities – you get a lot more done that way."

The landscape proved nearly impenetrable due to the hard packed earth and rocky terrain in the region. Theurer said the soil is made of metamorphic volcanic rock mixed with unconfined volcanic ash.

"The ash is what makes it so difficult to drill here," he said.

He explained the ash causes cave-ins while drilling because each hole requires water or some other sort of drilling solution to bring the chips of broken rock to the hole's surface.

"We had our bad days and good days. Sometimes things didn't go so well, we had a lot of problems drilling and the rig would break down, but it was usually pretty good," said Schantz, describing the unit's motivational difficulties.

The ground impeded the soldiers' progress and occasionally discouraged their efforts – during these times the soldiers adapted by taking a minute and reassessing the situation. Wamsley, a light equipment operator,

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(Above) Army Staff Sgt. Kori J. Schantz mans the LP-12 drill, which continues boring into the earth. Once it reaches the water table it will provide drinking water to the people of Talwallah, Djibouti. (Below) Army Staff Sergeant Schantz mans the drilling system while an Army Sgt. 1st Class Russel J. Theurer adds water to the drill which helps clear the rock from the well hole while drilling continues.